

OFFICIAL ANTI-SEMITISM IN OLD RUSSIA

The Origins

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THE brutal flare-up of anti-Semitism in the USSR and its satellites a few years ago reminded the world that a tradition of official anti-Semitism had long existed in Russia, and that it has not been entirely extinguished yet. Indeed, state anti-Semitism in Russia had in time past come to be accepted as a natural phenomenon: "The Russian government"—so the customary statement went—"was traditionally reactionary and anti-Semitic." But it was not only the more reactionary Czars who were anti-Semitic; reformers like Catherine the Great and Alexander II espoused a kind of systematic and official anti-Semitism no less than did the repressive Czar Paul I or Czar Nicholas I.

Only the peculiar circumstances that presided over the birth of official Russian anti-Semitism can account for its strength and persistence from Ivan III till today. These circumstances can even be dated quite precisely. It was in the second half of the 15th century that it all began: in a period that was, for Russia, one of those crucial moments in which the course of future events could have been steered in one of several directions with equal ease.

FOR this article on the origins of the Russian tradition of state anti-Semitism, which recent years have shown to be still very much alive, LEON POLIAKOV has drawn on a chapter in his monumental work in progress, *Histoire de l'Antisemitisme* (of which the first volume was reviewed in COMMENTARY in December 1955 by James W. Parkes). Mr. Poliakov is research director of the Center de Documentation Juive in Paris and author of *Harvest of Hate* (*Bréviare de la Haine*, 1951), a comprehensive study of the Nazi effort to exterminate the Jews of Europe. His last appearance in COMMENTARY was with "Launching the New Fascist International" (November 1952).

The Russians were converted to Christianity in 988, and in subsequent trials of force they very nearly succeeded in conquering Byzantium. During the 11th and 12th centuries, a powerful Russian state was built up, with its capital in Kiev in the Ukraine (Moscow was still only an obscure principality), whose prestige was such that the kings of France and the princes of Germany considered it an honor to be united by ties of blood with the Kievan grand dukes. During this period, Jewish merchants, bringing precious spices and silks from the Orient to Europe, were welcomed with open arms at the court of Kiev, just as they were at the court of Aachen on the Rhine, and at Lyons in France.

One of the main gates of the city of Kiev was called Gate of the Jews, and Jews had their own quarter in the town. But it was not a ghetto they lived in: they spoke as equals to the Russian ecclesiastics, and even exercised a certain cultural influence. Specialists have been able to recognize scarcely altered Talmudic themes in many old Russian legends and in certain passages of Russian apologetic writing.

But then came the Mongol invasions, which brutally interrupted the growth of Russian civilization, cutting it off from Byzantium and the West, and nothing more was heard of Jews in Russia for another three centuries. Few Jews could have gone there during this period, for international communications were broken and trade had fallen off to a trickle.

Kiev never regained its former eminence. Meanwhile, in the northeast of Russia, in the forested regions, a new power arose that little by little freed itself from the Mongol yoke and became the center of a new state and culture.

AT FIRST Moscow welcomed the Jews as Kiev had done before. During the 15th century, when the foundations of Muscovite power were being laid, Jews streamed there; what is more, they were expressly invited to come. With the fall of Byzantium in 1453, Moscow emerged as the principal center of Greek Orthodoxy, and Greek ecclesiastics and refugees proclaimed that it was destined to become the "Third Rome." The importance of this image of Russia in determining policy was to increase from century to century. In the name of the Third Rome, the energetic Grand Duke Ivan III quadrupled his territory and even dreamed of reconquering Byzantium from the Turks.

In such ambitious projects Jews, being good diplomats and traders, could serve as useful aides. One such Jew, Hoza Kokos, served as intermediary between Ivan and his ally, Menghi-Guirey, Khan of the Crimea, and it appears from documents preserved in the Moscow Chancellery that part of their correspondence was carried on in Hebrew! The same Ivan III went to much effort to bring another rich Crimean Jew named Zacharia to his court. "Come to us," Ivan wrote him. "When you come you will be able to judge the esteem in which I hold you. And if you are satisfied here, you will be free to go where you like; I shall let you depart without hindrance."

Medicine was another branch of knowledge in which medieval Jews were specialists, and the Grand Duke took into his service Messer Leon, a Jewish doctor of Venice. He, poor soul, came to an unhappy end, being publicly decapitated in 1490 when his patient, the Grand Duke's son and heir to the throne, failed to respond to treatment during an illness and died. Such was the fate of the first Jewish doctor in recorded Russian history.

The free city of Novgorod, situated close to the Baltic Sea, welcomed Jews as enthusiastically as Moscow did. This great commercial center, which had escaped the Mongol yoke, maintained steady relations with the rest of Europe. Strong in its traditions of freedom and struggling to resist the

grip of Moscow, Novgorod placed itself under the protection of the Polish-Lithuanian state, choosing the Duke of Lithuania, Michael Oldkhovich, for its prince. When the Duke arrived in 1471, he brought in his train a number of Jewish merchants, one of whom, named Skaria, was renowned for his wisdom.

Skaria and the other Jews took part in theological discussions with the rich burghers and the priests of the city, and many of their arguments, it appears, were not unconvincing. An old Russian chronicle puts it thus: "A number of priests had friendly commerce with the Jews, and, learning to read in their books, gave themselves up to a life of abjection and became heretics, anti-Christians: thus it was with the priest Alexis, the priest Gavriilo, and many others. And heresy spread everywhere, and numerous, alas, too numerous, were those who thus lost their souls, destined for the flames of hell."

Another chronicle is briefer: "Heresy was introduced into Novgorod by the Jew Skaria." A third chronicle asserts that Skaria soon called to his aid two friends, Joseph Shmoilo and Moses Khanouch. Actually, however, reliable facts about the genesis of the "Judaizing" heresy in Russia are hard to find. The little we know has to be supplemented by the imagination. We can picture these Jewish pioneers, themselves in European garb, talking with bearded Slavs in long kaftans; we can conceive of them as arguing against a triune God and the divinity of Jesus, exhorting their antagonists to read the Old Testament for themselves, and teaching their new converts the first rudiments of Hebrew by smoky candlelight.

THE success of the "Judaizing" heresy in Russia can be ascribed to several factors. First of all, the Jews argued in simple and concise theological terms and concepts that were easier to grasp than the mysteries of the Trinity. They themselves were masters of Holy Scripture, whereas the Orthodox priests of that time and place were sunk in ignorance. And the Jews were sophisticated, having come from more civilized countries

than Russia. Their prestige, finally, was all the greater in the absence of any anti-Semitic tradition in the Russia of that period.

In any case, the burghers of Novgorod had always looked kindly upon foreigners, and commerce—a "Jewish art"—was responsible for the prosperity of their city. On the other hand, too, there were many complaints about the Orthodox clergy as being lazy, dissolute, and notoriously open to bribes. A movement of dissent, muffled but struggling to take shape, was already at work in Novgorod society and, like Protestantism in contemporary Western Europe, it seems to have been fostered by the needs of a rising middle class.

It should be remembered, too, that the success of Jewish proselytism in Russia was not a unique case. European history provides analogous examples of Jewish pioneers influencing newly Christianized people who were in the charge of a half-educated clergy lacking in self-assurance. It seems that the most diverse peoples lent an attentive ear to Jewish preaching wherever Christianity had not yet succeeded in establishing a solidly dogmatic grip on their souls. The curious reproaches hurled at the Jews by St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nyssa indicate that this is what happened in the Christian East during the 4th and 5th centuries C.E. That it was also the case in Charlemagne's empire in the 9th century we can infer from the indignant epistles of the archpriests Agobard and Amolon, as well as of other Gallic prelates.

Certain passages in the epistles of Agobard are particularly revealing. "Things have come to such a pass," wrote this prince of the Church, "that ignorant Christians claim the Jews preach better than do our priests. Certain Christians even celebrate the Sabbath with the Jews, and violate the blessed repose of Sunday. Many women live as servants or menials in Jewish homes; among them are some who have been turned from their duties. Men of the people, peasants, allow themselves to be drawn into a sea of errors, so that they see in the Jews the only people chosen by God, believing that only

among them is a pure religion observed and a faith far more certain than our own. . . ."

The Jewish proselytizers of 15th-century Russia disappear from the scene abruptly. After the 15th century no chronicle mentions their activity or their presence. It is as if they had never existed. But a curious confluence of events resulted in the further spread of their ideas.

By threats and stratagems, Ivan III had finally obtained control of Novgorod, and in 1479 he paid a formal visit to that city. At that time he was engaged in a struggle against the upper clergy and the monasteries, whose immense wealth excited his greed, and the agitation of the Judaizing heretics was useful to his cause. Consequently, while in Novgorod he openly showed his approval of them, and when he returned to Moscow he brought two Judaizing priests with him, placing them in important parishes.

FROM that time on, the "Judaizing" heresy propagated itself with lightning-like speed throughout Russia, but particularly in the circles close to the court. Protected by the Grand Duke, the heretics hardly troubled to hide their activities. Besides, they considered themselves Christians, denying not the divine mission of Jesus, but only his divinity: "He is like Moses, he is not like God the Father. How could God come down on earth and be born in human form of a virgin?" In order to propagate their beliefs more effectively, the heretics studied the Old Testament, translated it into Russian, and engaged in much intellectual activity.

These events took place fifty years after Wycliffe and fifty years before Luther: the heresy of the Russian Judaizers can be considered a kind of aborted Reformation which was rather more radical than that in Western Europe.

The supporters of Orthodox Christianity tried unsuccessfully to oppose this progress. The Archbishop of Novgorod, writing to Zosima, Metropolitan of Moscow, complained: "I was visited by a converted Jew named Daniel who is a good Christian. He had just returned from Moscow. He said to

me at dinner in the presence of many friends: In Moscow the Jews went after me in packs, saying to me: 'Dog, what are you doing now? The Grand Duke has ordered the Christian churches swept out of the city.'" But according to certain accounts, the Metropolitan of Moscow was himself guilty of Judaizing, "devoting himself to the seduction of the simple, getting them to drink the Jewish poison." In the words of a chronicler, "Never since the day when the Orthodox sun first shone in our land has there been such heresy; in the home, in the streets, at the fair, laymen and priests discuss the faith, basing themselves no longer on the teaching of the Prophets, the Apostles, and of the Fathers of the Church, but on the ideas of heretics and renegades from Christianity, with whom they have friendly ties and who instruct them in Judaism."

The struggle between Christian Orthodoxy and the Judaizers was intensified by a dynastic and political element. Ivan III had been married twice. His children by his first wife sided with the heretics and supported a policy of neutrality. His second wife, Sophie Paleologue, a Greek princess, remained faithful to Orthodoxy, and urged Ivan to ally himself with the Emperor of Germany and declare war on the Turks and try to reconquer Byzantium. For a long time the Grand Duke seemed to lean toward the Judaizing group in his family and designated his grandson, Dmitri, who was of that party, as heir to the throne. Thus it seemed probable that the Judaizing heresy would become the official state religion upon Ivan's death, and on this eventuality the majority of the courtiers wagered their careers.

Against an obscure background of palace intrigues, the struggle continued for some twenty years. In the end, just before Ivan's death, the camp of Sophie Paleologue won out. Sudden and violent persecutions overtook the heretics in 1504; their leaders were beheaded or went into exile; their followers were interned in monasteries. Christian Orthodoxy won and, with its victory, Russian autocracy took on definitive form.

From then on, fear and hatred of Jews be-

came a touchstone of imperial Russian policy. A simple principle was enunciated that was to be observed for the next four centuries with astonishing consistency: Jews, being "poisoners of souls," were not to be admitted into Russia. Some time after 1526 the Russian envoy to the Vatican, Gerasimov, declared in Rome: "As for us, we Russians fear above all the men of the Jewish tribe, and never will we let them come among us." Still more characteristic is the retort Ivan the Terrible made to his ally, the King of Poland, when the latter asked him in 1550 to allow certain Jewish merchants of Poland to come to Moscow: "With regard to what you write us about allowing your Jews entrance to our land, we have already replied to you on several occasions: informing you of the evil actions of the Jews, who turned our people from Christ, introducing poisoned drugs into our state and causing much harm, for which they have been expelled or put to death. We cannot allow Jews to enter our country, for we do not wish to see evil done; we want God to allow the people of our land to live in calm without any trouble. And you, our brother, should not in the future write us anything about Jews."

That this energetic retort was a typical expression of contemporary Russian sentiment we know from the record of a conversation between a Moscow merchant, who had been in the Near East in 1558, and the Patriarch of Syria: "The Patriarch asked me if in our country there were believers in some other religion, Jews, Moslems, or heretics. I replied: No, for in our empire they have no right to live, and as far as the Jews are concerned, our prince has forbidden these dogs to enter our land even for purposes of trade. The Patriarch then bowed his head very low to me and said: May God bless your Prince, the Czar Ivan Vasilievich and his sons, Ivan and Fyodor, for having driven out the infidel Jews as one drives out wolves, in order to preserve the Christian flock. . . ."

NATURALLY, certain acts went with such talk, and those acts consisted not only in the inflexible observance of the prohibi-

tion against the presence of Jews in Russian territory, but also in the massacre of those Jews whom the hazards of war brought within reach of Muscovite power.

Jews in Poland and Lithuania, both of which countries were invaded at different times by Russian armies in the 16th and 17th centuries, had much to suffer from this policy. Many chronicles record what happened, and so do many foreign travelers, like Peter of Arelund, a Dane, who summed up the situation as follows: "Though cruel and intolerant, Ivan the Terrible never persecuted anyone for religious reasons, that is, excepting Jews. He did not seek to bring them to the Christian faith or to baptize them; he burnt them alive, hanged them, had them drowned; it was his habit to say that no prince should believe in their words or pity them, since they had betrayed the Redeemer and caused Him to be assassinated."

The atrocities committed against Jews by the Russian armies reached a height in the middle of the 17th century after the insurrection of Bogdan Chmelnitsky, when Russian troops penetrated first into the Ukraine and then into Poland. Jews were massacred on so vast and barbaric a scale as to arouse shocked attention in civilized countries elsewhere. According to a German report of the period, entitled *Die Judenstadt von Lublin*, it was a frightful spectacle to see how Jews both old and young were led into the synagogues like herds of cattle and, despite their cries and supplications, put to the sword. A London newspaper, *Mercurius Politicus*, reported in 1625: "The Cossacks, with a strength of about 160,000 men, occupied the city of Lublin on the 15th, and massacred all the Jews; the Muscovites pillaged their homes and set them on fire." We know, too, the deep, dark mark that the "black years" of 1648-56 have left in Jewish tradition.

NEVERTHELESS, in that same period a little Jewish colony was founded in Moscow. But its members were all converts to Christianity, or at least that is what they seemed

to be. Jews were welcomed with open arms by the Russians—who were never xenophobe—whenever baptism, or even some substitute for it, released them from their religion.

The origins of the Marrano settlement in Moscow are fairly obscure, but it emerges into clear view at the beginning of the 18th century when, under Peter the Great, Peter Chapiro and the four Vesselovsky brothers, all converted Jews, practically monopolized Russian diplomacy, and even acquired considerable influence in other departments of the administration.

Bitter complaints at this state of affairs were expressed by the Jesuits (who were another Russian *bête noire*, which they have remained down to this day). Their principal agent in Poland sent this report to Rome in 1709: "Certain Jews have attained to the highest positions of the administration in the country. One controls the chancellery of the Czar, another administers educational institutions, a third is first secretary of the minister Menshikov, a fourth is governor of the province of Vologda (he refused me permission to visit the Polish prisoners there, who are in great distress), and others are placed in other important positions. All of them are unrelenting enemies of the Holy Church. They help the Calvinists and the Lutherans in every possible way, and they never let an occasion pass to do us injury."

We also have the report of a diplomatic busybody, the Danish ambassador to St. Petersburg, who informed his government that as far as he knew Peter Chapiro systematically abstained from pork!

Apparently, the very things which struck the attention of foreigners went unnoticed by the Russians. On the other hand, they were extremely vigilant in seeing to it that no open and declared Jew got into the interior of their country. Peter the Great himself, so liberal in other respects, summed up the rule governing his conduct in a remark made to Monsignor Paolucci, the Papal delegate: "The Jews and the Jesuits have no right to enter my country." And he stuck to this principle even though, being an eminently practical man, he had proclaimed on

another occasion: "Whether a man has been baptized or circumcised, it's all the same so long as he is a good man and knows his business."

The mass of Russians had the same attitude towards Jews as the authorities. In 1743, under the Empress Elizabeth Petrovna, the daughter of Peter, the Russian government took the final steps to make definitive and official a tradition that had already long existed in fact.

As the result of one of her wars with Sweden, Russia had acquired the territories of Livonia and Courland, which were inhabited by a fairly dense Jewish population. Annexation made them all Russian subjects. Did they thereby acquire the right to enter the interior of Russia proper, or were they to be confined to the provinces? Local functionaries and provincial governors invoked both economic and moral arguments to bolster their demand that at the very least Jewish merchants should be allowed to visit certain important fairs in Russia, and the Russian senate submitted an opinion along these lines to the Empress Elizabeth. Her reaction was swift and clear: "I want neither interest nor profit from the enemies of Christ," she wrote with her own hand on the margin of the report. This maxim became a precedent for subsequent Czarist policy.

In the second half of the 18th century, when Russia took over the major part of Poland already containing at that period more than half a million Jews, the question of admitting Jews into Russia was raised again, and with all the greater pressure behind it this time because of the greater number of people involved. But the decision was

the same. The prohibition was maintained, and a whole body of special legislation was now created to implement it. This legislation was added to under succeeding Czars, and neither the humanitarian projects of Alexander I nor the more ambitious ones of Alexander II, fifty years later, brought any notable modifications to it. Thus did the famous "Pale of Settlement" come into being.

BUT anti-Jewish legislation was not the only way in which Russians reacted to the "Judaizing" heresy. The heresy played a profound role in the early development of Russian culture, stimulating the spread of education and stirring both clergy and laymen to think for themselves. According to a Russian ecclesiastical historian of the last century: "We cannot but see in this heresy the first and most important indication of the awakening and independence of the national Russian spirit." What is more, though the heretics were vanquished they were never completely uprooted; many of them took refuge in the outer provinces of Russia, or in the great northern forests, and survived there.

For centuries the sect led an underground life and was responsible for many of the schisms and dissident movements so characteristic of Russian religious life. Its most direct spiritual descendants are the Molokhans and Dukhobors of our own day, whose tribulations in Canada are now and then reported in the newspapers. Such have been among the various and long-range effects of the adventuresome journey undertaken in 1471 by a Polish-Lithuanian Jew, Skaria, to the court of his prince in Novgorod.